



The Samaritan

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Introduction

In his CDAMM article on '[Early Jewish Sign Prophets](#),' Nathan C. Johnson looks at first-century Jewish [millenarian](#) figures as described by Josephus, the Jewish historian writing towards the end of the first century. Here is an excerpt on one figure: The Samaritan (36 CE; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.85-87).

The Samaritan

The first figure to offer a self-authenticating sign in Josephus appeared in Samaria and threw the nation into 'uproar' (85). According to Josephus, this anonymous Samaritan was a populist leader who 'catered to the mob in all his designs' (85). His adherents followed him to Mount Gerizim, the most sacred mountain in Samaritan lore and the site of a former temple that had been destroyed by the Judean Hasmoneans in the second century BCE. The leader claimed he would show his followers 'the sacred vessels which were buried there, where Moses had deposited them' (86). Whatever these vessels were (perhaps instruments used in the tabernacle and temple, as elsewhere in *Antiquities*), their revelation would link the Samaritan to Moses, the great liberator of his people. Thus, in one sign, the [prophet](#)-leader brought together deliverance (from Rome and the Judeans), restoration (of worship and perhaps eventually the temple), nativism (restoration of ancestral customs vis-à-vis a foreign presence), and self-authentication (as a new Moses).

The nationalistic and revolutionary import of his message was not lost on followers, who 'found his speech convincing' and 'came armed' (86). Whatever the Samaritan leader's original designs, the movement appears to have taken on defensive and/or militant aims. That the group may be characterized as a 'revolutionary millennial group' (Wessinger 2011, 7) is hinted at in the way followers were 'stationed at a certain village' (86). before their planned ascent of Mount Gerizim. Arms and strategic organization demonstrate a degree of realism in the face of what the movement was up against, even as hopes of finding Mosaic implements suggest a belief that God was with the movement.

Their ascent, however, never happened. The governor of the wider region, Pontius Pilate, headed them off with cavalry and well-armed infantry. Many of those stationed in the village were killed or imprisoned,

while others fled. The ringleaders were executed—including, we must assume, the Samaritan himself.

The combination of the [prophet](#)'s authenticating sign, nativist and scripturalist themes, and armed organization give the movement a strongly millennial character. The Samaritan leader appears to have held powerful sway over adherents, since 'the report that [followers attempted to] proceed up the mountain despite being blocked by Roman troops suggests that the yearning for liberation had reached a fevered pitch and emphasizes their absolute trust in the prophet's message of divine deliverance' (Horsley with Hanson 1999, 164). As in other revolutionary [millenarian](#) movements, the belief that salvation was at hand outweighed the clear and present dangers of opposing forces. Nor was the leader a cynical opportunist, rousing the masses without believing the message himself—he appears to have been executed along with many of his supporters. Though his religious aspirations never materialized, the Samaritan's uprising did have the surprising effect of Pilate's demotion and the return of another set of holy instruments—the vestments of the high priest—to their native inhabitants.

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